

John William Daly, 1933–2008

H. Martin Garraffo

Received: 19 March 2008 / Accepted: 27 March 2008 / Published online: 11 April 2008
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2008



Tango has been defined as a sad thought that you can dance. Tango started as a happy, playful music at the end of the nineteenth century, but soon evolved into a sentimental song, nostalgic, melodramatic, and sad. Somehow I associate this moment, this writing, with tango.

I have the task of reporting that John William Daly has passed away at the young age of 74 from a destabilizing pancreatic cancer. An Emeritus Scientist at NIH, John has left his family and his many friends around the world with a broken heart. His departure is an irreplaceable loss for science too.

H. M. Garraffo (✉)
NIDDK, NIH, Bethesda, MD, USA
e-mail: garraffo@helix.nih.gov

John Daly was a giant, combining the fields of organic chemistry and pharmacology. He was the world authority in amphibian alkaloids and an expert in many areas of natural products. A prolific writer until the very end, John was the author of around 700 papers, including books and chapters. Due to his excellence and his indefatigable labor, he was a reviewer of many hundreds of scientific papers. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, USA, in 1997 and became a member of several national academies around the world. As relaxation he chose fishing, and as with everything he tackled, he became very good at it while multitasking.

John Daly, a native of Portland, Oregon, received a bachelor's degree in Biochemistry in 1954, a masters degree in Organic Chemistry at Oregon State College in 1955 and a Ph.D. in Organic Chemistry at Stanford University in 1958. After a two year postdoctorate at NIH in the Laboratory of Chemistry, he became a permanent member of the staff in 1960, a section chief in 1969, and the founding chief of the Laboratory of Bioorganic Chemistry in 1978. He became a NIH Scientist Emeritus in 2003. During his five decades at NIH, his research spanned many disciplines. He was involved in isolation, structure elucidation and synthesis of novel natural products, particularly frog skin alkaloids, and receptor agonists/antagonists, and in the elucidation of their mechanism of action with a focus on receptors, ion channels, and second messenger formation in the nervous system.

Between the years 1969 and 2000 John had a dynamic group of about 10 people working with him at NIH: chemists, pharmacologists, and technicians. He was the leader and the natural link between all, able to understand and to mentor. He was also the field worker during many trips to the rain forests of the world, collecting frogs and arthropods in the search of dietary sources for the more than 800 frog skin alkaloids discovered. He combined in one person, a great scientist, the Sean Connery of Medicine Man, and the Harrison Ford of Indiana Jones.

When I think of John, two of his characteristics strike me the most. John was always very friendly, very kind, even when he should not have been. His door was always open and anyone could interrupt his thoughts. It seems as if he did not mind, but of course he was serious about wasting time. His normal week at NIH would be 60 h or more. Even while driving he used to record instructions and memos. The second is his management of everything related to science. In his small office, as can be seen in the picture above, he had neat stacks of folders, inside cabinets, on the shelves, on the walls from top to bottom, in the drawers. Nothing could take more than a few minutes to be retrieved, even

before computers, and everything is still there from the 1960s. His room should be a museum now, an example of cramped economy and order.

It is very difficult to speak of John in the past tense. A few days ago we were discussing work. He also told me recently something about his personality, like in a message, he wanted to be self-sufficient to the end, and he was, almost... I still look for his Jeep parked in front of the building and I am surprised it is not there. That Jeep should be a monument, a symbol for hard work and science. An old friend of John told me that the Irish do not talk about death. No death for the Irish! But there should be no past tense when referring to them. John *is* and will be with us. Just imagine questions to him. Just imagine his answers. Upon mastering this technique and with John's encyclopedic knowledge, just imagine the rewards in terms of consulting fees.

In Spanish the word "maestro" is used both for teacher and for master. I want to say good bye to both in John. ¡Adiós al maestro! or simply in tango slang "gur bai" (pronounce goor-bye). H. Martin Garraffo, Ph.D. Staff Scientist, NIDDK, NIH Member of Daly's group since 1987.